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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY ANALYST ASSESSES SARG
INTERESTS IN IRAQ, LEBANON, WITH IRAN

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Pro-regime foreign policy analyst Imad Shueibi told A/DCM February 24 that the SARG did not view a dialogue with the U.S. restricted to the issue of Iraqi refugees without the return of an Ambassador as sufficiently broad-based or high-level to persuade the regime to re-engage. He described the Iraqi refugee issue as "a card we flashed but did not play," to threaten Iraqi refugees and get the attention of the U.S. He admitted that the SARG was supporting a moderate level of political instability in Lebanon and predicted it would get worse if there is forward movement on the establishment of a special tribunal. He urged U.S. policymakers to engage with Syria over Iraq, where he believed there were shared interests. Shueibi insisted that tension in Syria-Saudi relations had subsided significantly and underlined that the Syrian regime wanted -- and was capable of reaching -- a peace deal with Israel. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Syrian foreign policy analyst Dr. Imad Shueibi, who is close to the regime and whose views generally reflect SARG views, told A/DCM February 24 that the Iraqi refugee issue "was a card we flashed but did not play," alluding to the SARG announcement in late January of draconian new regulations -- since frozen -- that could have forced tens of thousands of Iraqis out of Syria. In Shueibi's view, the SARG wanted to communicate that they could take actions that would create tremendous PR and administrative problems for the Administration. Once that point was made, the SARG quietly shelved implementation of the new policies.

¶3. (C) The SARG had not decided against engagement with the USG on refugees, but had concerns about the conditions for engagement. According to Shueibi, the refugee issue alone does not represent a sufficient basis for a political dialogue. "This is a limited issue, it does not communicate that Syria is at the center and needs to be treated by the U.S. as important." Added Shueibi, "You need to treat us as if we are the main player, because we are." Shueibi also noted that there is a "dignity" issue involved, given the limited scope of the issue and the fact that the U.S. had yet to return an Ambassador to Syria engage in such discussions. On a more general level, the SARG wants to ensure that the U.S. "will respect the sovereignty of Syria" and is looking for shared interests rather than to issuing dictation.

¶4. (C) Regarding the situation in Lebanon, Shueibi predicted that the current chronic level of instability would continue but would probably not escalate. Syria is "waiting to make a

compromise with the U.S. in Lebanon. He described the current situation in Lebanon as "a show" rather than a really unstable situation, but hinted that Syria could push the situation into real instability if there are moves to accelerate formation of the tribunal in Lebanon or if the UNSC takes action under Chapter VII. In the event of UN action, "we will play our cards" in Lebanon and the situation "will get worse."

¶ 15. (C) Shueibi insisted that the U.S. and Syria had shared interests in the unity and stability of Iraq, underlining that Syria feared the possibility of partition and civil war, which would like bring spillover violence, instability, and sectarian tensions -- mirroring those in Iraq -- to Syria. Shueibi assessed that Iranian calculations on Iraq envisioned significantly higher levels of instability and -- unlike Syrian calculations -- did not factor in the prospect of using Iraq to improve relations with the U.S. He accused Iran of playing a complicated double game, supporting the government of PM al-Malki, but also supplying arms and money to groups that opposed the government and the U.S. presence. Added Shueibi, "If the U.S. wants to get control of the situation in Iraq, it needs good relations with Syria."

¶ 16. (C) Shueibi professed not to be concerned about Iranian efforts to work with the Saudis on the Lebanon issue. He hinted strongly that Syria had blocked any forward movement on this initiative and was now using the Iranian efforts as a means of improving its own relations with the Saudis. He predicted that by the time of the late March Arab summit in Jeddah, the Iranian channel "will disappear." In his view, the problems in the relationship between Syria and Saudi Arabia had subsided significantly, with King Abdullah having adopted a less anti-Syrian position in the past two months

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since a Hizballah delegation visited Riyadh.

¶ 17. (C) Regarding the prospects for a peace agreement with Israel, Shueibi insisted the Syrian regime wanted -- and was capable of reaching -- a peace deal with Israel. He criticized the U.S. for what he described as exerting pressure on Israel not to move forward on peace talks. Shueibi rejected the view of some in Syria that the minority regime of Bashar al-Assad could never really sign a final peace deal with Israel, insisting that reaching peace and obtaining the return of the occupied Golan were interests that all Syrians shared, and especially the Sunni majority. He urged the U.S. and the international community to "test us" if there are doubts.

¶ 18. (C) Comment: Shueibi's comments represent Syria's efforts to portray Syrian issues solely through the lens of U.S.-Syrian relations. For example, while pressuring the U.S. administration might have been a by-product of recent tougher positions on Iraqi refugees, we believe the real reason was a major surge in anti-Iraqi feeling in Syria, coupled with security concerns over the magnitude of the large and growing Iraqi presence. Similarly, Syria has real national interests in Lebanon which it hopes to further with no reference to the U.S. However, Shueibi's remarks provide an interesting perspective on how one analyst close to the regime sees relations with the U.S. and may reflect a more sophisticated strain in regime foreign policy thinking, although that represents just one element in the calculations of Bashar and his inner circle.

CORBIN